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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

JOHN FRISSELL, A.M., M.D.

FROM

CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHY

OF

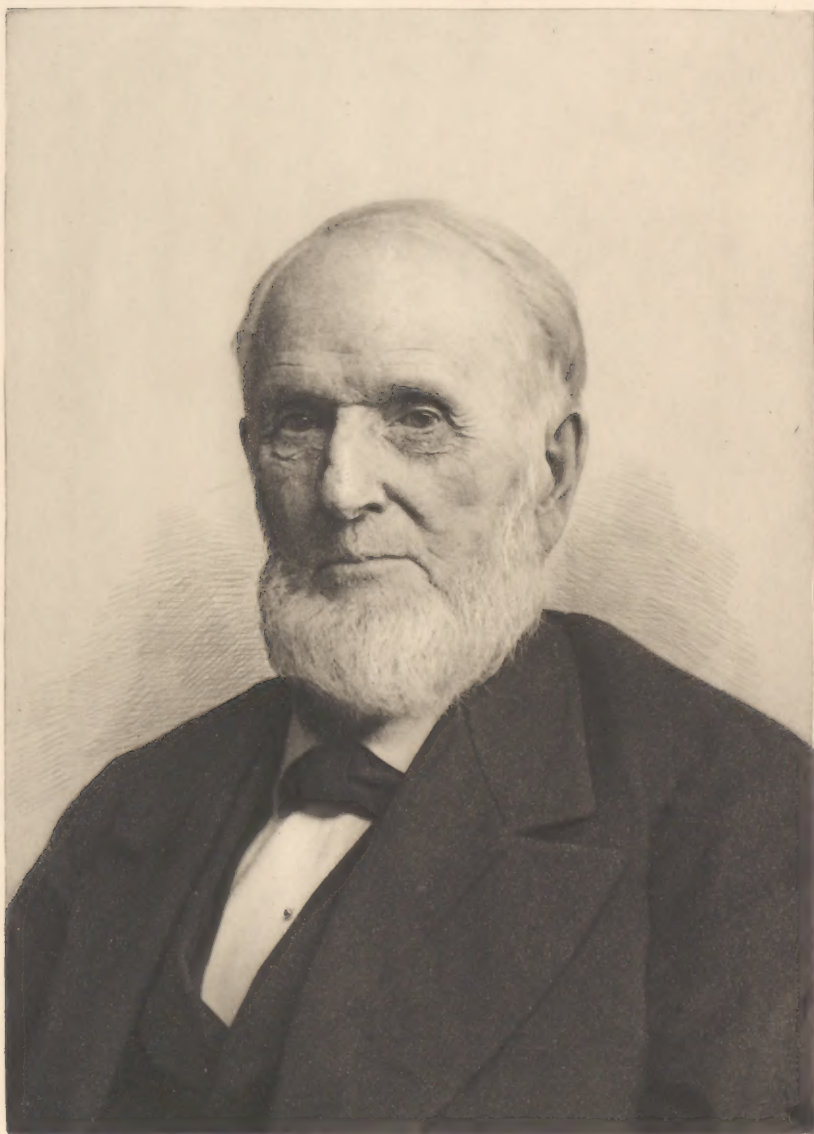
WEST VIRGINIA.



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JOHN FRISSELL, A.M., M.D., an eminent physician and surgeon, of Wheeling, W. Va., and recognized as the Nestor of the medical profession west of the Alleghanies, was born in Peru, Berkshire Co., Mass., March 8th, 1810. He came of mixed English and Scotch ancestry, his father being Amasa Frissell, a farmer, whose antecedents were Scotch, and his mother of English parentage. They had six children, four sons and two daughters, and being well to do, were able to secure for them an excellent education. The eldest of the sons took to agriculture and became a farmer, while the other three, after being properly prepared by academic instruction, went through college and entered the liberal professions—one as a lawyer, (who rose to become a Judge) another in theology, and the third in medicine. Of the two daughters, the eldest became a missionary to the Choctaw Indians, and located at a station in the north eastern part of the State of Mississippi, while the other daughter married and removed to New York City, where she settled.

John Frissell, the subject of this sketch, followed the customary practice in his day, in country neighborhoods, working on the farm in summer with his father and attending the common school in winter. He showed an aptitude for study and was sent to the academy in Old Hadley, and from there he entered Williams College in the autumn of the year 1827, graduating four years later, Bachelor of Arts. Attracted to the study of medicine by his own natural proclivity, he at once went into the office of Dr. Ebenezer

Emmons, of Williamstown, who, aside from being a distinguished physician, was professor of chemistry and natural history in Williams College, and where for two years young Frissell had been his assistant in the chemical laboratory. Added to the instruction which he received in the office of Dr. Emmons, he attended lectures, in the fall of 1832, in Pittsfield, Mass., at the Berkshire Medical College. In the next spring, Prof. Willard Parker invited young Frissell to Woodstock, Vt. where he became demonstrator of anatomy, and at the end of the same year, filled the same position for Prof. Parker in the Berkshire Medical School, including in his duties that of performing the dissections for the professor, and afterwards recapitulating to the class the Professor's lecture, while carefully superintending and instructing all those students making dissections. He continued to fulfill these duties during the year 1834. at the same time attending lectures, and graduated M. D. from the Berkshire college at the close of the term, in the fall of the same year, receiving the degree of A. M. from Williams College. He remained in Pittsfield for another year, listening to recitations and instructing students in anatomy, materia medica, etc., and demonstrating his fourth and last course of lectures.

On June 3d, 1836, Dr. Frissell removed to Wheeling, Virginia, and began practice, at the same time teaching. His business was not very brisk in the beginning, and he gave lectures on various subjects—temperance, phrenology and physiology,—and taught botany, rambling with classes through the coun-

try, seeking flowers and specimens, and lecturing in the schools of Wheeling. He possessed a taste for geology and mineralogy, and this he indulged by study of the rocks and minerals in his neighborhood, and in this way passed his first years in Wheeling.

Meanwhile, he was not idle socially, being teacher and leader of the choir of the First Presbyterian Church during fifteen years or more, which brought him in contact with the prominent members. But this was only in the beginning of his career. The time soon came when the practice of his profession filled all his time, and his work in it made him notable as a man of remarkable scientific attainments and gifts as a surgeon, a discoverer and a healer. He became physician to the Convent of the Sisters of the Visitation, to St. Vincent's College and to the school for young ladies at Mount de Chantal.

With ideas in advance of the profession in general, Dr. Frissell was always ready to adopt any improvement, invention or discovery which promised to ameliorate the condition of the sick or injured. Thus, he was the first surgeon in Western Virginia to employ chloroform in capital operations, and it is a remarkable fact in his professional experience that, although he employed it in thousands of cases, no serious accident ever occurred in his practice. A large proportion of Dr. Frissell's work was,—on account of the fact that Wheeling was a manufacturing and commercial city—in the line of surgical practice, laborers and mechanics being necessarily exposed to frequent accidents.

Fortunately his exact knowledge of anatomy and his remarkable skill in manipulation stood him well in hand, and he speedily grew to be recognized as one of the best surgeons in Western Virginia. As early as 1838, for instance, he performed an operation for hairlip and deformed upper jaw, and the following year operated on club-foot by division of the tendons, shortly after the first operation of this

character had been performed by Dr. George McClellan, of Philadelphia.

In 1841, Dr. Frissell began practice as an oculist and became celebrated for operations upon the eye, beginning by an operation for strabismus and extending his business until it covered nearly all the different operations on the eye, including the total extirpation of the organ in a diseased condition, either by enucleation or by removing with the eye a part of the tissues of the orbit. In 1846, Dr. Frissell performed his first operation for stone in the bladder, and in 1856 his first successful operation for vesico-vaginal fistula.

Dr. Frissell began his relations with the hospital institutions of the city of Wheeling as early as 1845. He was at first with the Wheeling Dispensary, which was conducted during its brief existence by Doctors Todd, Bates and Hildreth, one of the four physicians being present at a certain hour each day at the office and dispensary room ready to prescribe for patients desiring advice and medicine. This was in 1845, and in the latter part of the same year an infirmary was started by Doctors Frissell and Hullihen to accommodate private patients—an infirmary which was entirely under their control, they being the only physicians in the city possessing the right to either send patients there or attend them. In March, 1850, the Wheeling Hospital was chartered and put in charge of the Sisters of St. Joseph by Bishop Whelan. Doctors Frissell and Hullihen remained as surgeons, and it was under the same restrictions as before. Later this hospital was extended, through the purchase by Bishop Whelan of additional property, its capacity being increased to 150 patients. This institution was under the charter of a board of directors, of which Bishop Whelan was the head. Dr. Hullihen died on March 27th, 1857, when Bishop Whelan, with the approval of the board of directors, appointed Dr. Frissell the surgeon and physician of the

Wheeling Hospital, giving him the entire professional charge of the institution, an appointment which has never been changed. In fact, from the organization of the first infirmary in 1845, up to the present time, nearly half a century, Dr. Frissell has had the main charge and direction of the hospital institutions of the city of Wheeling, and full charge since the death of Dr. Hullihen. As the hospital, since its completion, has fully supplied the needs of West Virginia, Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio, for regular hospital patients, it will be seen that the responsibilities have been great and the duties exacting. Of late years, Dr. Frissell has left most of the hospital work to his son, Dr. Charles M. Frissell, although still exercising a supervisory interest in the affairs of the institution and over the admission of patients.

Soon after the beginning of the Civil war, Dr. Frissell was appointed by Gov. Pierpont, medical superintendent of the military prisoners and sick soldiers of Wheeling, and the surgeon-general of the United States Army continued him at the same post with the rank of assistant surgeon up to the close of the war. He also served as a member of the State Board of Examiners for surgeons entering the army during the war. Meanwhile, he has filled the position of surgeon to the marine patients at Wheeling for nearly forty years.

The remarkable success achieved by Dr. Frissell in operations for stone in the bladder have become well known throughout the profession in the United States. He has operated in his neighborhood many times by what is known as the lateral operation, and always with success, never having lost a patient or had any evil results occur from pyæmia (or blood poison), and yet he has used in his practice almost invariably for anti-septics merely pure water, insuring perfect cleanliness accompanied by devoted care; in fact he has found no better success in the employment of late years of carbolic acid and bi-chloride of

mercury solutions. He has been known to operate successfully for stone on a patient only two years of age, and also with equal success upon one who has passed the age of three score and ten years. His operations for strangulated hernia have also been numerous and very successful, except in cases where mortification supervened. In the case of uterine polypi and fibroid and other tumors Dr. Frissell has had an experience probably unequalled by the majority of physicians in the country. In some instances these tumors were removed in sections, in order to diminish their size to a point at which they could successfully be extirpated either by the ligature or by ecrasure. As cancer is frequently one of the *sequalæ* of these diseases, and as in Dr. Frissell's practice the extirpation has been complete and without such results, it will be seen at once with how much skill, judgment and knowledge he operated.

In plastic surgery, Dr. Frissell has been no less successful, and a case of this character which came under his treatment, and for which he performed the operation necessary, in 1871, ranks among the most remarkable of its kind known to medical literature and history. This was a case where the chin and sternum were held nearly in contact.

Dr. Frissell is a member of the Ohio County Medical Society, of the American Medical Association, and of the State Medical Society of West Virginia, of which he was the first President. He is also an honorary member of the Medical Society of California, and in 1876 was a member of the International Medical Congress. Modest and unassuming in his character, Dr. Frissell has never cared to make publication of his successful cases and operations, but fortunately for the profession, others have valued them at their true standard and have described and written them out for medical and other journals, while they can also be found in the transactions of the West Virginia State Medical Society.

Dr. Frissell has justly gained the highest reputation in his State as its leading surgeon. In accomplishing this, his devotion to his profession and to his patients has been assiduous and intelligent. Meanwhile, his remarkable success has not seemed to elevate him in his own estimation, and he is known as well for his jovial and pleasant disposition, and his elevated character and charming manners as for his professional attainments and success. Dr. Frissell was married on December 3d, 1850, to Elizabeth Ann, daughter of Col. John Thompson of Moundsville, W. Va. They have two sons living, of whom the eldest, a graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York City, is a practicing physician and surgeon, and now occupies his father's position, and the younger has been scientifically educated, and is chief chemist in the Wheeling steel plant at Benwood.

A circular was issued to the profession in West Virginia under date of Feb. 28, 1867, signed by Dr. Frissell, Thomas Kennedy of Grafton, H. W. Brock of Morgantown, J. C. Hupp, E. A. Hildreth and others of Wheeling and other places, calling for the organization of a State Medical Society. The Society was duly organized at Fairmount, April 10, 1867, and Dr. Frissell chosen President. The first semi-annual session was held at Wheeling, Wednesday, Oct. 2, 1867, in the Hall of the House of Delegates. Dr. Frissell, President, took the chair; Rev. D. W. Fisher of the First Presbyterian Church, by request of the President, addressed a fervent petition to the Throne of Grace. Dr. John C. Hupp, of Wheeling, Chairman of the Committee of Arrangements, being called upon by the President, made an address of salutation to the profession. In a vigorous and eloquent address, Dr. Frissell voiced, among other sentiments and truths the following, which are selected:

"I trust that this Society will be the means of ad-

"vancing largely our noble science, and greatly "ameliorate the suffering of those afflicted by accident or disease, and I trust it will prove a powerful arm in elevating our State to a level with her older and more favored sisters." * * *

"We do not propose to admit those who have been nominally educated as regular practitioners, and have straggled off, with various excuses into some form of quackery, for the purpose of making money faster, or living easier, more pleasant and indolent lives, or because, which is the most common reason, they lack the talent, the energy and the honesty to succeed in making a living in the practice of regular scientific medicine."

The Doctor gave a concise and learned sketch of the history of medicine from Æsculapius who "was a Greek and lived thirteen centuries before the Christian era." He referred to Hippocrates, Pergamos, Galen, Paracelsus and others, and said:

"The Science of Medicine is progressive. More has been learned of medicine in the last century than in the six thousand years before. Since the days of Bacon and the adoption of his principles of reasoning, a great amount of material, of facts, have been collected. Many valuable general principles have been deducted from them, and the practice of medicine vastly improved."

At the first annual meeting of the Society, held at Clarksburg, Doctor Frissell made another characteristic address full of learning and valuable advice. Referring to the prejudice that used to exist against the dead body and against those who handled the dead and especially against the surgeon and demonstrator of anatomy, he said:

"Who would not prefer, were their own feelings alone concerned, to be useful after death to the living, rather than undergo the slow and disgusting process of chemical decomposition, in the silent recesses, gloomy vaults and putrifying vapors of the charnel house? The moment life departs, numerous insects deposit their eggs unseen by the friends who watch by the side of the corpse, and when committed with the body to the earth, they are dormant only until sufficient heat is evolved by putrefaction to call them into activity, and then they feed to fullness on the rankling corpse; and when ready to assume their perfect shape, they make their way to the surface and are carried

"abroad on the four winds of heaven to repeat a similar process on other dead."

Speaking further in regard to the practical study of anatomy and physiology, he said :

"Theory never could have discovered that the stomach was the receptacle into which crude material was cast for the purpose of manufacturing blood to nourish the system, and that it performed a great and important part in the process of changing food into blood ; that the heart was a double organ, made of muscles, containing four cavities, two for black blood and two for red ; that the lungs were made of air-tubes and blood-vessels tied together by cellular tissue, and that the blood was changed from black to a red color while passing through their substance on its way from the black to the red blood heart ; that the skin and numerous membranes were great depurating surfaces, from which vast quantities of fluid are passed off, that had served its purpose in the economy and was no longer needed ; that the liver was the drug-store of the human body, and manufactured the physis necessary to keep it in order while in health ; that the kidneys were sewers, and drained from the blood the worn out material remaining in it, after it had traversed the system and given out its supply of nourishment to every part of the body."

He further dwelt on the subject of cancer, and various operations of a difficult nature, and paid his compliments to quackery in all its forms :

"But great men are different. They do not shine by the same light nor in the same way. Cooper and Cline, of London, were graceful and accomplished operators, while Abernethy and Hunter, less showy in their operations, greatly excelled them in their pathology and knowledge of disease."

"Abernethy was a disciple of Hunter, who taught that operations should be performed when necessary, but that the great merit of surgery was to avoid their necessity."

"Abernethy showed the great importance of the principles of surgery, while Cooper and Cline how much elegance there was in a nice operation."

"There was, perhaps, about the same difference between Mott and Stephens of New York. Dr. Mott excelled in the nicety of his operation, while Stephens excelled in the pathology and practical knowledge."

"It was a common remark thirty years ago that a patient should consult Stephens in regard to the propriety of an operation, and if he advised it, have Dr. Mott perform it."

"They were both great surgeons, but Mott excelled in his coolness, self-possession, mechanical dexterity and niceness of his operations, while Stephens excelled in his knowledge of disease and profound judgment." * * * *

"Those who think the favorable results of disease or injury depend solely upon the skill of the physician and the curative effects of medicine, forget, or perhaps they never understood, that this '*Vis Medicatrix Nature*', this curative power of nature—this old Doctor Time, is working steadily on by night and by day, curing patients, while the physician stands by to direct the regimen, give necessary remedies, and regulate the movements of the system."

"I have endeavored to inculcate correct principles and sound doctrines that will elevate the profession ; that will aid in advancing medicine towards a perfect science ; that will increase the means for the relief of the sick and afflicted, and create harmony and brotherly love among all true members of the profession."

Dr. Frissell concluded his address with this significant paragraph .

"I hope we shall all feel a pride in conducting the affairs of this Society, that after a half century has passed by, and the profession of a new generation occupy our places, as they look over the books and musty pamphlets of olden time, and read the records and early history of this Society, they will be constrained to say that the founders of the Medical Society of West Virginia were wise and good men, that they inculcated sound doctrines in medicine and morals, and deserve to be remembered among the benefactors of the human family."

Of Dr. Frissell's many papers and surgical operations, extending over fifty-three years of practice, a few are here mentioned, viz. : "Report on stone in the Bladder and Urinary passages", a lengthy paper citing many cases ; "Plastic Surgery, Case of Distressing Deformity occasioned by a burn." "Chin and sternum held nearly in contact. Successfully treated by autoplasmic operations." (The patient, a young lady, is still living in excellent health, and with scarcely a scar visible.) Pa-

per on "Cephalic Version": "Vesico Vaginal Fistula," (several cases.) The following are among the strictly operative cases successfully performed; Urinary Calculi, Staphylo-rraphy, Orteo Sarcoma, various cases of Encephaloid Cancer, Ruptured Uterus, Cancer of the Rectum, numerous cases of Cancer in different parts, Multilocule, Encephaloid Tumor of the Abdomen with cancerous disease of the left kidney."

Dr. Frissell had contributed to the Medical Society of West Virginia, as published in the

Transactions, 241 pages of solid printing, or about 120,000 words, from April 10th, 1867, to May 25th, 1882. These multifarious and most interesting reports and lectures cover a vast field of pathology and operative surgery.

Although not in active practice Dr. Frissell occasionally acts in consultation with his son, Dr. Charles M. Frissell, who sustains his father's reputation in a highly creditable manner, and is one of the most popular and gentlemanly physicians in Wheeling.

